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SKETCH
OF
M'DONALD CLARKE.

"THE MAD POET."

BY CLARK JILLSON.



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OF
M'DONALD CLARKE.

“THE MAD POET.”

“MEN CALL ME MAD—’TIS A WONDER I AM NOT.”

By CLARK JILLSON.

WORCESTER :
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1878.

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“It has long been the fashion to abuse me—I don’t expect much else among mortals. It cannot curdle my temper, nor cover my memory with thorns. If I could win the good wishes of a few noiseless names—interest *one* in my welfare, I should be quite contented with a very low rank on the rolls of the present. Posterity will put us in our proper places.

M'D. C.





M'DONALD CLARKE.

NEAR the close of the last century, there was standing in New London, Connecticut, a dilapidated old house, occupied by one Captain CLARKE, a seafaring man, and his wife.

In this house, on the 18th day of June, 1798, the subject of this sketch was born. He was an only son, a frail and sensitive child, but the idol of an affectionate mother, who watched over him in his early years with the most tender fidelity.

His rights were constantly being invaded by his playmates, who were always ready to take advantage of his physical delicacy, or wound by vulgar words, his sensitive nature; and it was no uncommon thing for him to leave his associates in disgust at their rudeness, and take shelter in his mother's arms.

On one of these occasions she made to him the following remarks:—

“My poor child, you are in a world where an affectionate nature will be sadly disappointed, if it expects to be fondled with kisses.”

His mother died at sea when he was but twelve years old, and was buried beneath the stormy flood, without coffin, shroud or funeral rite.

In speaking of the time when his mother last sailed from the port of New London, he says:—

“I watched the ship-lights, long and late ;
When I could see them no more, for tears,
I turned drooping away,
And felt—that mine were darkening years.”

He alludes to the return of the vessel in which she sailed, as follows:—

“I saw the Log Book of the ship,
When it came back from its stormy trip,—
There was scrawl'd on a dirty leaf,
As if by one who knew not grief—

Died, at Sea, of consumption,

ANN M'DONALD,
The Captain's Wife.
Nov. 27th, 1810.”

This frail and delicate boy, so unfit for the stern purposes of life, went out alone to struggle with selfishness, without the first qualification for the task he had undertaken.

On the 13th day of August, 1819, at the age of twenty-one, he first appeared on Broadway in New York, and in that city his future life-work was performed. His social nature led him to seek the companionship of those of similar tastes to his own, but such persons were not very plenty in the great city; and when disappointment and reverses came to blight his happiness, no kind mother with tearful eye stood ready to share his sorrow.

Being a stranger, and a peculiar one at that, without wealth or influence, his prospect for becoming acquainted with persons of respectability of his own age, was not flattering.

At length his affections were placed upon a young actress, who responded to his generous nature with the most ardent devotion. Her mother, not pleased with his prospects in life, forbade their marriage; but the two kindred spirits could not thus be separated, and they were soon married in spite of maternal authority. This female demon was not satisfied to let them live quietly and happily together, but sought out their place of abode, and at midnight took her daughter away, declaring she should never live with CLARKE another hour. They soon met again, but being penniless, were often obliged to seek repose with no shelter except the starry dome above.

Through the influence of this inhuman mother, they were again separated, never more to meet

on earth. In consequence of this sad event the noble spirit of the young poet was crushed, and reason no longer sat undisturbed upon her accustomed throne. He wandered up and down the principal thoroughfare of New York, friendless and alone, more desolate than before he had known his lost wife.

Thus, a young man of brilliant intellect, and as pure a heart as ever beat within a human breast, was doomed to suffer the most malignant abuse.

Ere long he manifested strong symptoms of insanity, and was immediately conveyed to the Asylum on Blackwell's Island, where he remained for a short time. His death occurred on the 5th day of March, 1842, under the most melancholy circumstances. He was found by a policeman late at night in a destitute condition, and was placed in a cell in the city prison, where he was found dead in the morning, drowned by the flow of water from an open faucet.

In accordance with his own request, he was buried near Sylvan Lake, in Greenwood Cemetery,

"Where flowers will bloom in May,
Where birds will love to sing."

His monument is plain and humble, but the inscription is truthful and pathetic. It will not fail to moisten the eye of many a wanderer who may chance to look upon this humble stone.

The inscription tells the story of his life in a single word, as follows:—

“POOR M'DONALD CLARKE.”

Much of his poetry is strikingly original, and contains some of the most beautiful expressions; and his social nature had such control of the entire man as to be traced in all his writings.

The following may be quoted as a specimen:—

“A fair—an unforgotten girl—
The chosen of my childish days,
With brow o'er which soft ringlets curl,
Smiles, from her grave, upon my gaze.

Again I see the old arm chair,
Where many a summer night I've knelt;
The rounded cheek that rested there,
The sparkling eyes that seemed to melt.”

As a general thing he paid but little regard to the rules of poetical composition, but seems to have written from impulse; consequently many of his poems reached the public in an unfinished condition, and yet they contain an occasional gem like the following beautiful lines:—

“Now twilight lets her curtain down,
And pins it with a star.”

In his poem entitled “Spring,” which is an ill constructed piece of composition, full of odd expressions, extending entirely beyond all poetic

license, may be found one of the most beautiful lines ever written in the English language—

“God bless the warm blue eyes of Spring.”

On one occasion he was sneeringly alluded to by a reviewer, who used the word *zigzag* in reference to brains. CLARKE called at the office of the paper in which it was published, asking permission to reply, which was granted, on condition that he would occupy only four lines. He made a reply in the following words:—

“I will tell Johnny——, in the way of a laugh,
Since he’s dragged my name into his pen-and-ink scrawl,
That most people think it is better by half
To have brains that are ‘*zigzag*’ than no brains at all.”

In his poem entitled “Sabbath Evening” may be found the following lines which, show the sweet simplicity and devotion of their author:—

“I feel the happier all the week,
If my foot has pressed the sacred aisle ;
The pillow seems softer to my cheek ;
I sink to slumber with a smile ;
With sinful passions cease to fight,
And sweetly dream on Sunday night.”

Had this child of genius been favored with proper treatment in his early years, he would undoubtedly have been one of the brightest stars in America’s constellation of poets. But his entire

life was a struggle for existence, which had a tendency to crush out his finer feelings, and deprive him of every opportunity and advantage which others, less worthy, were permitted to enjoy.

When he was so situated as to be able to promote the happiness of another in the least degree, he was happy himself; and on many occasions he has been known to share his last farthing with a more needy brother.

Mrs. Child speaks of him as one of the purest hearted and most affectionate of beings, "Simple and temperate in all his habits; and in his deepest poverty he always kept up the neat appearance of a gentleman."

He died at the age of forty-four, expressing the desire to be buried by the side of children. He said "Four things I am sure there will be in Heaven—music, flowers, pure air, and plenty of little children."

In 1836 the Poems of M'DONALD CLARKE were published in a volume of two hundred and eighty eight pages. It contains a fine portrait of the author, whose beautiful features are at once impressed upon the mind, and there forever fixed, like the charm of an enchanted vision.

In speaking of social life, he says:—

"Marriage can alone soothe the vulgar irritations of business, and reconcile man to his destiny. It is a poet's only hope of usefulness. The *heart* must be at rest, before the mind, like

a quiet lake under an unclouded evening of summer, can reflect the solemn starlight, and the splendid mysteries of heaven."

His poems are full of allusions to the memory of his mother, and in his introductory remarks he says with much apparant feeling:—

"I've suffered in haughty silence undeserved neglect, and often hear my dear dead Mother's solemn voice tolling thro' my dreams, telling me to *fight* my way through ungenerous obstacles that burden my soul."

His preface closes with the following words:—

"If the life of my poetry is wholesome, it will breathe after the wild spirit that inspired it has been sobered at the terrible tribunal of Eternity, and the weak hand that traced it, long wasted to ashes."

But all these beautiful traits of character, his pure motives, his blameless life, his genius and his affectionate nature, were not appreciated by the people, and he was allowed to die neglected, and almost unknown to the literary world, except as "*The Mad Poet of New York.*"



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